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Article

Gambling and drugs: The role of gambling among Vietnamese women incarcerated for drug crimes in Australia

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Abstract

This study of 35 Vietnamese women imprisoned for drug crimes in Melbourne, Australia, demonstrates a strong association between problem gambling and illicit drug markets, notably heroin trafficking and cannabis cultivation. Specifically, problem gambling in Melbourne's casino provided both the main motivation and the necessary network brokerage for drug-related crime. More generally, the study demonstrates the importance of socio-cultural dynamics in drug-related crimes: in particular, the social embeddedness of ethnic and immigrant participation in illicit drug markets through social relationships formed at the casino; the influence of the institution of informal lending *cho'i hui*; and women's agency in drug markets, independently of their kinship and marital relations. The study also highlights the importance of minority perspectives in criminology, presenting an opportunity for policy officials to develop more finely-tuned interventions directed towards the articulation between gambling and drugs.

Keywords

Drug trafficking, gambling, illicit drugs, Vietnamese, women

Following the deregulation and legitimisation of gambling in English-speaking countries, there emerged a substantial literature on its negative social effects, especially crime. For the most part, this literature addresses property crime such as theft, embezzlement and misappropriation, but barely considers drug-related crime (Grinols & Mustard, 2006; Stitt, Nichols, & Giacomassi, 2003). This article demonstrates how 'problem

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gambling' informs illicit drug markets in the Australian context. In doing so, it draws upon a qualitative study of 35 Vietnamese women imprisoned for drug crimes in Melbourne, Australia, notably trafficking of heroin and cultivation of cannabis. More than half of the women interviewed in this study were motivated by debts incurred through casino gambling. More than this, their pathways into illicit drug markets were forged through their gambling networks.

In more general terms, the article builds upon three lines of theoretical inquiry in relation to illicit drug markets. First, it elaborates upon the influence of socio-cultural dynamics in drug-related crimes, especially cultural frames and social networks, over and above the 'risks and prices' highlighted in neo-classical approaches (Dwyer & Moore, 2010). Second, it shows how 'minority perspectives in criminology' builds a richer understanding of participation in illicit drug markets by ethnic and immigrant minorities (Phillips & Bowling, 2003, p. 270). Third, it highlights women's agency in drug markets, independently of their kinship and marital relations (Denton & O'Malley, 1999).

Illicit drug markets

Dynamics

From the 1980s, neo-classical economic orthodoxy reconceptualised drug trafficking from a 'criminal activity' to a 'commodity trade' driven by 'risks and prices' (Dwyer & Moore, 2010; Olmo, 1996, p. 376). According to this approach, price is 'a surrogate outcome measure of law enforcement effectiveness'. Specifically, it 'represents the risks associated with being arrested and imprisoned', 'compensation for sellers' time', and 'compensation for risks and injury associated with the violence within some illicit drug markets' (Ritter, 2006, p. 457). Following this logic, greater law enforcement increases prices, which reduces demand – a virtuous cycle. The orthodoxy has provided the rationale for a convergence of sentencing policies worldwide (Fleetwood, 2011).

A substantial body of ethnographic research challenges the economic approach. The most established line of inquiry highlights the manner in which drug markets are 'embedded' in social relationships, reputation and trust. In the USA, for example, Adler and Adler observe that 'dealing circles were generally very close, tightly knit groups', attracting 'people of roughly the same age, race and ethnic origin who conducted their business along similar standards of security, reliability, involvement and commitment' (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 311). In the UK, Dorn, Murji, and South (1992) describe how drug groups were based on trust, emotional bonds and welfare concerns akin to 'real or adopted family' (p. 41). In Australia, Denton and O'Malley note 'close and long-term kin ties' among women drug dealers, 'bound even more tightly together by norms of reciprocity, expectations of personal gain and perceived moral duty to support blood relations' (Denton & O'Malley, 1999, p. 519).

Another line of inquiry observes that risks and prices are not necessarily aligned. In the USA, for example, Caulkins and Reuter (2006) observe that prices for illicit drugs have declined despite substantial increases in enforcement and incarceration. In Ecuador, Fleetwood's interviews with incarcerated drug traffickers show that more serious offenders do not necessarily carry larger quantities of drugs. Specifically, 'mules'

generally carry larger quantities than professional traffickers, mostly because they do not know how much they are carrying. As a result, sentence guidelines based on weight – consistent with neo-classical orthodoxy – punish less serious offenders more heavily (Fleetwood, 2011, p. 375).

There are more tentative lines of inquiry which assert the influence of social networks (Coles, 2001) and cultural frames (Phillips & Bowling, 2003), over and above risks and prices. This article builds on these lines of inquiry, both of which are salient in research on ethnic minorities and illicit drug markets.

Ethnic minorities

The association between ethnic minorities and illicit drug markets is one of several ‘strong’ and ‘consistently supported associations in empirical criminology’ (Braithwaite, 1989, p. 41). There is a long line of inquiry which shows how this association is inflated through discriminatory policing and sentencing strategies, as manifested in criminal justice statistics (Joseph, 2006; Murji, 2007; Paoli & Reuter, 2008). Yet the association is not reducible to discrimination. Diverse studies, for example, identify Columbians as key traffickers of cocaine in the Netherlands and the USA (Decker & Chapman, 2008; Zaitch, 2002), Vietnamese as major cultivators of cannabis in the UK and Canada (Silverstone & Savage, 2010), Turks and Albanians as the main importers of heroin to Europe (Paoli & Reuter, 2008), and so on. In this context, Phillips and Bowling urge criminologists to move beyond ‘the polemical and now sterile debate centred on elevated rates of offending versus discriminatory criminal justice processing’. Instead, they call for ‘the formulation of minority perspectives in criminology’, which direct attention to ‘the “lived experiences” and subjectivities of minorities’ (Phillips & Bowling, 2003, p. 270).

There is a long tradition which – in the spirit of Merton’s (1938) theory of social structure and anomie – understands minority participation in illicit drug markets as the product of blocked opportunity structures; that is the disjuncture between cultural goals and institutionalised means, giving rise to ‘innovation’. In the USA, for example, Bourgois explains the ‘pursuit of success’ by Puerto Rican crack dealers in New York’s East Harlem as ‘following the minute details of the classical Yankee model for upward mobility’ (1995, p. 326). In Western Europe, Paoli and Reuter describe Turkish and Albanian heroin importers as adopting ‘a queer ladder of social mobility’ (2008, p. 23). In the UK, Silverstone and Savage conclude that Vietnamese cannabis cultivators ‘are primarily motivated by profit rather than “lifestyle” concerns’ (2010, p. 16). Yet researchers also warn against a ‘rigidly structuralist perspective’ (Bourgois, 1995, p. 17). Not all disadvantaged groups have high crime rates, and only a tiny proportion of individuals within minorities adopt drug crimes as their vehicle for social mobility.

In this context, researchers direct attention to opportunity and network structures which promote participation in illicit drug markets. They include network ties in countries of origin, where drugs are produced or transported en route; and cultural resources, notably family and communal structures and values. For example, in Western Europe Paoli and Reuter observe:

Although trafficking groups are often distinguished on the basis of their ethnicity, it is family ties that really keep drug trafficking groups together... Strong family and local

ties ensure not only the cohesion of the trafficking group but also impermeability to police enquiries. (Paoli & Reuter, 2008, p. 25)

'Minority perspectives' provide the best possible vehicle for understanding network ties and cultural frames. Yet it should not be assumed that networks and frames operate in the same way for men and women.

Women

In 1999, Denton and O'Malley observed that 'women are conspicuously absent from most accounts of drug distribution, and where featured, they have been depicted as "unsuitable" as drug sellers, and as having peripheral or exploited and subordinate roles in male selling networks' (1999, p. 513). This is still true. Maher and Hudson's review of the international literature identifies only 15 studies that provide 'thick descriptions' (2007, p. 809) of women's experiences in the illicit drug trade. Their metasynthesis identifies three main themes: the drug economy as 'gender stratified and hierarchical'; women's role as mediated through their relationships with men; and women's sexualisation within networks (Maher & Hudson, 2007, p. 813).

Yet Denton and O'Malley (1999) also observed a substantial body of research highlighting the importance of family networks and trust in illicit drug networks, and women's pivotal role in these networks. In turn, their observational study of women drug dealers in Melbourne reported that the 'innermost core' of the typical drug business was family or quasi-family relationships, grounded in trust (1999, p. 528). More generally, a growing body of research shows that women's role in illicit drug markets is pervasive, diverse and complex. Campbell's study of drug smuggling along the US–Mexican border, for example, describes four levels of participation: 'female drug lords' at the top; middle-level women who 'may manipulate gender stereotypes to their advantage', 'low-level mules', where women's involvement is concentrated; and women affected by the involvement of their menfolk (Campbell, 2008, p. 233). In turn, drug smuggling is a vehicle of both 'victimization' and 'empowerment'. Similarly, Anderson argues – contrary to the 'pathology and powerlessness narrative' of mainstream criminology – that women are 'not only powerful actors in the drug world, but... central to the drug economy' (Anderson, 2005, p. 371).

The sharp increase in the number of Vietnamese women in Victorian prisons for drug crimes makes it impossible to overlook their participation in the illicit drug trade. This study addresses the nature of their participation and the degree of their agency.

The Vietnamese in Australia

In 2011, there were more than 185,000 Vietnamese-born people living in Australia, making it one of the largest Vietnamese-diaspora communities in the world (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Outside East Asia, only the USA (1,600,000) and France (250,000) have larger communities (Ben-Mosche & Pyke, 2012, p. 19). Most Vietnamese-Australians arrived in the wake of the Vietnam War, as refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s, or through family reunion programs thereafter. Following arrival, Vietnamese migrants settled close to each other and stayed close together. This was

especially the case in the two largest cities Sydney and Melbourne, resulting in 'the transformation of many public spaces and suburbs' (Thomas, 1999, p. 109).

From the outset Vietnamese-Australians most commonly found work in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, and experienced relatively high rates of unemployment. In turn, they were heavily affected by the restructuring of the economy and structural unemployment during the 1980s and 1990s (Coughlan, 1998; Viviani, 1996). In this context, a 'Vietnamese enclave economy' (Coughlan, 1998, p. 187) emerged and prospered. It included widespread resort to government benefits by people in paid work; 'illegal home workshops' in the garment industry, characterised by low pay and poor conditions; and an informal lending and credit system, providing access to cash outside of the formal finance sector (Jakubowicz, 2004; Thomas, 1999, 2001; Viviani, 1996). Thomas describes the informal lending and credit system – known as *cho'i hui* (literally 'the game of borrowing') – as common practice, allowing people to 'amass a large amount of cash in a short time' (1999, p. 126). *Cho'i hui* facilitated relatively high rates of home ownership among Vietnamese-Australians notwithstanding their socio-economic disadvantage (Thomas, 1999).

Vietnamese migration coincided with the rapid growth of illicit drug markets in Australia. In the mid 1990s, police officers and the media created a 'moral panic' (Rowe, 2002) in highlighting Vietnamese involvement in these markets, through 'criminal gangs' concentrated in Cabramatta (in Sydney) and Footscray (in Melbourne). One Melbourne police officer, for example, told the press how 'Vietnamese criminals in Footscray' obtained their heroin from 'the Triads', and were 'unafraid to resort to violence to achieve their aims'; while the local tabloid declared a 'dramatic escalation in the local drug war', with gangs responsible for 'murder, extortion, home invasions and prostitution' (Rowe, 2002, p. 41). More recently, researchers document disproportionate use of heroin among Vietnamese-Australians (Higgs, Owada, Hellard, Power, & Maher, 2008; Ho & Maher, 2008; Reid, Higgs, Beyer, & Crofts, 2002; Webber, 2008), fuelled by socio-economic disadvantage; notably, 'high unemployment, poor English proficiency, experiences of racism, social and economic difficulties, inter-generational conflicts and acculturation' (Reid et al., 2002, p. 127). They also note that Vietnamese heroin users 'frequently' participate in street-level heroin markets as a way to 'finance' their habit (Higgs et al., 2008, p. 690; Maher et al., 2002, p. 187).

Vietnamese migration also coincided with the deregulation and legitimisation of gambling, in particular the spread of casinos and electronic gaming machines. From the late 1990s, a growing body of research documented Vietnamese-Australian participation in casino gambling (Chui & O'Connor, 2006; Raylu & Oei, 2004; Scull & Woolcock, 2005). In 1997, for example, one study reported that people of 'South-East Asian appearance' made up 25–31% of patrons who entered Melbourne's Crown Casino, much more than their representation in the Melbourne population (Hallebone, 1997, p. 368; Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority, 1997). More recently, researchers describe disproportionate spending among Vietnamese-Australian gamblers (Raylu & Oei, 2004, p. 1092) and unrealistic expectations of profit-taking, based on the view that casino gambling involves skill as well as luck (Chui & O'Connor, 2006, p. 73; Ohtsuka & Ohtsuka, 2010; Scull & Woolcock, 2005, pp. 34–35; Zysk, 2002). In turn, they observe a 'pervasive sense of denial' among problem gamblers, arising from 'enormous shame and stigma' (Scull & Woolcock, 2005,

p. 29). The upshot is that problem gamblers do not consult professional services but try to resolve their position on their own and within their families.

Researchers have so far understood problem gambling and drug trafficking as unrelated issues for Vietnamese-Australians, but sporadic media reports suggest otherwise. One current affairs show, for example, reports that 'criminal networks' are 'actively recruiting [Vietnamese] problem gamblers playing poker machines at pubs and clubs, to traffic heroin and cultivate cannabis' (Thompson & Bell, 2011). A Sydney newspaper describes 'recruiters' who 'approach struggling gamblers with an offer to lend them money and, when they fail to meet repayments, pressure them into becoming mules to pay back the money' (Ralston, 2011). A Melbourne newspaper quotes the president of the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association as claiming Vietnamese women are overrepresented in Victorian prisons because of 'venturing into crime to repay gambling debts'. Contrary to other reports, she observes that electronic gaming machines have little appeal to Vietnamese women, unlike the 'glamour' of the casino:

In Asia people make bets on anything, on the rain, but the attraction of the casino is something new and very effective. Those women, they usually don't go to a psychologist or a family therapist. They say the best way to forget or escape is to go to the casino. The casino staff make you very welcome. (Munro, 2010)

This article provides the first empirical evidence on the articulation between gambling and illicit drug markets for Vietnamese-Australian women.

Methods

This study is based on in-depth interviews and direct observations carried out by the first author in the two women's prisons in Victoria, Australia, in 2010 and 2011. It occurred in the context of a sharp increase in the number of Vietnamese women in Victorian prisons for drug crimes. In 2007, there were 14 Vietnamese-born women in Victorian prisons, 5.4% of all women prisoners; by 2010 there were 50 Vietnamese-born and six second-generation women, amounting to 17.9% of all women prisoners. Of the 56 Vietnamese women in custody in 2010, 43 (78.6%) were there for drug crimes. In introducing herself to these women, the researcher presented herself as a postgraduate researcher writing a thesis on Vietnamese-Australian women convicted of drug trafficking. The women were then asked if they would be interested in sharing their stories about the circumstances and motivations that informed their involvement in the drug trade. Of the 43 women, 35 (81.4%) agreed to be interviewed.

The 35 participants in this study identified five distinct categories of motive that drove their involvement in the illicit drug trade. These were gambling debt, economic gain, non-gambling debt, romantic love and drug addiction. This article focuses on the 18 participants who found their way into the drug trade through gambling. Their demographic profile is similar to other participants in the study. Their median age was 44; most (at least 12) were secondary educated; more than half (13) were divorced or separated at the time of interview; and the majority (15) depended upon government unemployment benefits and/or precarious work in the informal economy. Most (12)

were involved in the heroin trade and all 18 participants were incarcerated as a result of their first arrest.

The Vietnamese ethnicity of the first author meant that participants understood her an 'insider'. In turn, it facilitated – in the words of Papadopoulos and Lees – 'more favourable access conditions and cooperation' and 'more equal context for interviewing, which allowed more sensitive information to be collected' (2002, p. 261). Participants routinely made this point themselves. For example:

It's because you are Vietnamese that I confide and speak to you. If you want to know anything, then I will tell you...but if a Westerner came here to ask me questions, then I would not speak because they are Westerners and I am Vietnamese. (Ai)

If a non-Vietnamese person came in here to interview me today, I wouldn't talk to them. They don't understand. You are Vietnamese so you understand and listen to my story with empathy. (Quỳn)

Doing interviews in Vietnamese promoted access and rapport. Of 35 interviews, 29 were in Vietnamese, 3 in English, and 3 in both languages. Yet a shared culture, tradition and worldview were even more important – especially because the research was about something normally 'shrouded in secrecy' (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 160). Vietnamese forms of address based on age (Ho, 2006) illustrate the point. At the time of interviews, the first author was 28 years old, much younger than many participants. As a display of respect, she addressed elder participants as 'chị' [elder sister] or 'cô' [aunt], and those who were younger as 'em' [younger sister] or their first name. Participants extended the same courtesy by either addressing the interviewer as 'con' [daughter], 'chị' or 'em'. The combination of respect and intimacy in this form of address minimised the power relations often inherent in qualitative research.

Interviews were loosely structured, designed to give 'prominence to human agency' (Reissman, 1993, p. 5). They began with demographic questions such as age, country of birth, education status and employment history, which provided background information and facilitated rapport. The interviewer then invited participants to 'take the floor' (Reissman, 1993, p. 56) and tell their stories. Participants occasionally checked the relevance of what they were saying, whereupon the interviewer provided reassurance. Interviews followed a chronological logic, mostly beginning with childhood. Probes about specific events and anecdotes ensured that the interview was able to 'stay close' to the participant's 'experience and perspective' (Neuman, 2003, p. 391). More generally, the 'style and pace' (Ho, 2006, p. 59) of interviews reflected participants' temperament and comfort level. Most interviews were about 90 min; the longest was 3 h and the shortest was 20 min.

From the first interview, the interviewer was alerted to participants' shame and embarrassment about their involvement in the drug trade. A direct question about 'drug trafficking [*buôn bán ma túy*]' produced an immediate display of uneasiness. The participant paused, and then replaced the term 'drug trafficking' with 'pathway'. Throughout interviews, participants invariably used euphemisms such as 'the stuff [*đồ ấy*]', 'merchandise [*hàng*]' or 'this pathway [*con đường này*]'. They did not explicitly

refer to 'drugs' or 'drug trafficking'. They referred to 'heroin' or 'cannabis' only in response to direct questions about the drug markets in which they were involved.

In close connection, participants commonly framed their behaviour in terms of victimhood, where desperate circumstances caused uncharacteristic behaviour. As Presser observes, personal accounts of drug involvement 'always draw selectively upon lived experience', forging 'a sense of coherence that experience lacks' (Presser, 2009, pp. 179–180). In this study, participants presented a moral account which distinguished themselves from the stigmatised 'evil' drug trafficker. In Hồng's words: 'I know that I did the wrong thing but it's not the case where everyone who goes to prison is evil'. In this context, participants were forthcoming about their role in the drug trade, their networks and their earnings. More than this, they were – as Liebling described her experience of prisoner interviews – 'painfully honest' (1999: 158) about their experience. Interviews were often emotional and cathartic. In many instances, prisoners described a sense of having nothing to lose in telling the truth. In Ai's words: 'I'm already in here. There's nothing else for me to hide'.

Reissman's (1993) view that researchers must respect the narratives of their participants – their structure and language – guided the analysis of interviews. In the first place, all interviews were transcribed verbatim in the language or languages in which they were conducted, thereby preserving their 'original oral character' (Maher, 1997: 225) and participants' meanings. A coding scheme was then created according to themes and sub-themes, such as 'motives for working in the drug trade' and 'pathways into the drug trade'. Following Reissman, care was taken to maintain the integrity of 'sequence and structural features that characterise narrative accounts' (Reissman, 1993, p. 3). Finally, themes were compared across transcripts: grouping together narratives with similar themes and 'plots', identifying points of congruity and incongruity. The rest of this article is about two major themes in the interviews: first, the 'gambling pathway' into the illicit drug trade; and second, the 'drugs pathway', its network structure and organisation.

The 'gambling pathway'

Of the 35 participants in the overall study, more than half (18) were driven into the drug trade to resolve debts incurred through casino gambling. When asked how they ended up in prison, these participants unequivocally explained 'it's because I got involved in gambling at the casino [*tại vì cô bị vướng vào con đường cờ bạc ở casino*]'. Further, they distinguished themselves from other drug trafficking offenders, suggesting that gambling had damaged their usual judgement. Participants themselves remarked on the disproportionate influence of gambling. Tuyền, for example, declared: 'In my view, 80 per cent of women in [prison], who were involved in drug trafficking, are here because they lost at the casino'.

Participants invariably gambled on table games such as Black Jack, Baccarat or Poker at Melbourne's Casino complex. They did not gamble on electronic gaming machines in local pubs or clubs. The casino was a place to socialise and meet other Vietnamese people; it was a socially acceptable place for a woman on her own; and it provided an opportunity to escape personal problems at home, such as marital conflict,

loneliness and bereavement. Tuyèn observed: 'It's because of your circumstances, and you're fed up with life that you go there'. Phúc reflected that the casino 'makes you happy and helps you forget about your problems'. Thủy elaborated on the particular appeal of the casino for women:

Vietnamese women don't like to drink or go to nightclubs... In terms of drinking, have you ever seen a Vietnamese woman drink alcohol? That just doesn't happen... In terms of going to the gym, us Vietnamese people don't go to the gym. Who is going to sweep the house? Who is going to cook? Who is going to sew the clothes? We're only free in the evenings so we go to the casino. That's all there is.

Participants also described 'magical thinking' around their gambling, insofar as they expected to make money at the casino. The notion of 'beating the system' was pervasive in their accounts, whether in terms of 'easy money' or 'chasing my losses'. Not a single participant framed her behaviour in terms of gambling addiction. For example:

In the beginning, I was winning! In one day, I would win \$1000, \$2000 and even \$5000. There were times that I won \$10,000. After winning all this money, I thought that this was such an easy way to earn money. (Kim)

Whatever money I had, I just gambled it all to try and win it back, to win it back and then I would stop playing. But each day, I dug a deeper hole and I couldn't recover the money... It's not that I was addicted to gambling; it's because I was addicted to money. (Nguyễn)

Once participants lost money, they obtained loans from other Vietnamese patrons at the casino. Three participants had themselves worked as 'casino lenders' before becoming gamblers – two of them using funds from their legitimate businesses, the other as a 'middleperson'. The media frames these lenders as 'loan sharks' who 'target' unsuspecting problem gamblers (*The Age*, 27 July 2009), but participants framed the loans as being akin to the informal Vietnamese lending practice known as *chơi hụi*, or 'the game of borrowing'. For example:

Everyone plays *hụi*. It's a way for us to save and borrow money. Say there are 30 people who play, and this can include family, friends or acquaintances and each person puts in \$500 each. So how much is 30 people? It's about \$15,000 isn't it? Each month someone gets to borrow that money but you have to repay with interest. (Veronica)

It's like investment banking. Each month, you can put in a minimum of \$200, \$500 or even \$1000. It just depends how big the *hụi* is and who is playing. My mother's *hụi* included people who were pretty well known like shop owners; people with reputations. Each month you invest the money in the *hụi* and you benefit more by resisting to borrow early on because you receive interest from people who borrow before you. (Angela)

In close connection, participants described lenders as 'friends [*ban bè*]' whose actions were understood in terms of 'helping each other out [*giúp đỡ nhau*]'. In doing so, they

highlighted the social embeddedness of the relationship, facilitated through the casino. Kim, for example, observed: 'You're eating and sleeping there... through gossip, you know everyone and everyone knows each other's business'. In this context, lenders sometimes approached participants, and participants sometimes approached lenders. For example:

It's like they are sitting next to you, also gambling. But these people are always gambling at the casino. They gambled next to me and we would have pleasant conversations. I would tell them, 'I've lost so much. Today, I've lost \$1000' or whatever amount it was. I was so upset so I borrowed money from them. (Thủy)

It's like people introduce you back and forth like that. For example, you're gambling and you've lost so much already. You start complaining to me about it. You say, 'I've lost so much, can you let me borrow some money?' I then introduce you to someone and all you have to do is repay the loan with interest. You then win at one hand and you're even. You just need to win once. (Bích)

As a corollary, loans occurred in the context of observed behaviour and reputation, including information about character, earnings and debt history. For example:

They trusted me so they lent me money. I just borrowed back and forth, back and forth like that. Do you understand? [Why did they trust you?] I was a regular gambler and I often went to the casino and they saw me there constantly. If they see you regularly gambling, they're not scared. And once I borrow from them, I repaid them straightaway. And so the next time, they lent me more. (Nguyệt)

They gave me the money and said, 'just play'. They don't just lend money to anyone. They lent me money once or twice before and I repaid them each time, and they saw that I was reliable so they kept on lending me the money. (Huê)

All terms of agreement were conducted verbally. The three one-time lenders described loans ranging from AUD\$5000 to AUD\$20,000 at any one time. Participants consistently reported an interest rate of 10% per week. Bích, for example, explained that if 'you borrowed \$10,000 then in one week, you would have to repay \$11,000'. Similarly, Thủy observed how 'they calculate the interest on a weekly basis', and in a month 'the \$5000 I borrowed will turn to about \$7000'. This amounts to an annual rate of 520%. For comparison, the *Consumer Credit Act* allows pawnbrokers to charge no more than 4% per month, or 48% per year. Notwithstanding these rates, participants overwhelmingly understood the terms of their agreements when they were made.

The exorbitant rates meant that there was necessarily a tipping point, where participants could no longer hope to recover their debts through gambling. The tipping point varied from \$30,000 to more than \$1 million, and plunged participants into crisis. At the top end, for example, Bích described how she 'sold everything' including her house, whereupon she was left with \$300,000 in debt. On a more modest scale, Tuyên

recalled how she ‘needed money to pay for my groceries and bills and petrol, so I didn’t have any money left to repay the debt quickly’. All participants except one described giving up gambling at this point. For example:

At the time, I had lost so much that I’d stop gambling. I had enough. I had stopped playing and I returned home to take care of my children but I was in debt of \$30,000–40,000. (Thào)

I didn’t continue down the pathway of gambling. I stopped cold turkey. When I had \$5000 or \$10,000 in my hand, I didn’t gamble away one dollar. I stopped just like that. I told myself that I would never gamble again. (Kim)

Yet giving up gambling was no longer enough. Desperate circumstances called for desperate measures. As a result, participants stepped off the ‘gambling pathway’ and onto the ‘drugs pathway’.

The ‘drugs pathway’

The 18 participants who joined the ‘drugs pathway’ through problem gambling described two distinct entry points. Ten participants – five each in heroin trafficking and cannabis cultivation – were ‘conscripts’, ‘forced [*ép*]’ into the drugs pathway. The other eight participants – seven in heroin and one in cannabis – were ‘volunteers’, who initiated their entry into the drugs pathway.

Consider conscripts first. These participants described how lenders ‘forced’ their involvement through threats and intimidation, echoing the media discourse around ‘loan sharks’. Nhu, for example, described how her lenders ‘knew my background like where my parents were living and which school my son attended’. Thào recalled her fear when lenders ‘came to my house banging on the doors and swearing at me, saying all sorts of things’. Hồng reported: ‘They forced me many times. . . They said to me, “if you don’t do your math and repay the money, then don’t blame me”’.

Yet none of these participants described physical violence or coercion. On the contrary, follow-up questions often led them to reframe their experience from being ‘forced [*ép*]’ to being ‘asked [*rù*]’. The common thread is that they felt that they had no choice in the decision. For example:

If you don’t pay off your debt, they force you, they demand it, and they go to your house looking for you. So you have to think about risky matters. . . if you don’t repay them, then whenever or wherever you run into them, they will just abuse you then and there. That’s why you try everything that you can to repay the debt. I didn’t have any other pathway to find the money. (Nguyễn)

I did think about it. Where was I going to get the money to repay these people? They said to me that I would only need to [become a crop-sitter] for a short period of time; within three months and I would have repaid all my debt. So I thought, okay, I would only be doing this for three months and I would finish paying off this debt. (Thào)

Most conscripts in the heroin trade worked as ‘mules’, personally transporting heroin via air travel from Vietnam to Australia. All conscripts in the cannabis trade were ‘crop-sitters’, taking care of hydroponic crops in suburban houses. Whatever their work, conscripts were at the bottom of the drug distribution chain, with most risk of police detection and arrest. The mules earned more money than crop-sitters, but at a cost. Hồng explained: ‘My role was just to go to Việt Nam when they asked me to, and these people had already organised someone to contact me once I was in Việt Nam’. The usual rate for these trips was \$20,000 – a figure consistent with other participants. Hồng’s handlers promised her a premium payment of \$50,000 per trip to repay a \$100,000 debt, but ‘I only did it once and I got caught’.

Mules smuggled the heroin in their luggage or body cavities. Consistent with Fleetwood (2011), they neither made this decision themselves, nor determined how much they carried. Hồng exclaimed: ‘Would you believe that I have never seen what heroin looks like before? Even while doing this, I still didn’t see what it looked like!’ Participants described boarding and disembarking as especially terrifying. For example:

I was so scared when I boarded the plane. When I exited the plane in Melbourne, I could’ve discarded the heroin in the toilet but if I threw it away, I was afraid that they would make me compensate for it... \$24,000, how was I going to pay that back? (Thu’o’ng)

I was praying to Buddha, ‘Buddha, Buddha, it’s because I didn’t know better this time. Please give me the strength to be strong. Let me arrive to Australia and I won’t dare do it a second time’. I was praying so much... Sitting on the plane for eight hours both my hands and legs were shaking so much. Even when I stepped off the plane I was shaking so much. (Cánh)

The five conscripts enlisted in cannabis cultivation described an experience which was less frightening and less remunerative. Nhu’, for example, owed \$35,000 in gambling debts. Her lenders wanted her to ‘go on a holiday’, and ‘bring heroin from Việt Nam to Australia’. She told them she ‘couldn’t do that because my children are still in school and I can’t leave’, so she ‘looked after the crops for them’ instead. Nhu’ explained:

They calculate beforehand how many batches of crops I would need to do before I have repaid all of my debt. They even calculate the equipment required to maintain the crops onto my debt. For example, if they sold the first batch of crops for \$20,000, then they would minus the money spent on the equipment needed to cultivate the crops, so they have made \$5,000. They would then deduct \$2,500 from my debt. I would still owe them \$32,500.

Like mules, crop-sitters had minimal contact with their operators, getting just enough information to do their duties. Nhu’, for example, recalled: ‘Besides my contact, I’ve never met the person who was behind all of this. Whether this person was a man or a woman, I don’t even know! I only knew the person who introduced me to this trade’. Similarly, Phúc explained: ‘I was only told to water the plants and I also had to cut and feed the leaves’. The duties were overwhelmingly lonely and boring.

In contrast to conscripts, volunteers entered the ‘drugs pathway’ through ‘friends from the casino’ other than their lenders. They did so as part of an active search for a

solution to their desperate circumstances. In this context, they acknowledged their agency and did not describe being 'forced'. Vân, for example, insisted: 'No one forced me. It was all up to me'. Hu'ong recalled how she actively sought advice from her 'friends' at the casino, asking 'how can you help me to repay the debt?' Bích declared: 'I needed to make money quickly so I jumped into this business. So that's what happened. I had to get involved'.

Volunteers adopted diverse roles in the heroin distribution chain, including coordination, supervision, recruitment, training, distribution and storage. In close connection, they highlighted the importance of trust, reputation and collaboration in their activities. For example:

They saw that I was an honest person because I had a good reputation. My good reputation is what got me into trouble because if I didn't have a good reputation then these people would never have given me any heroin. (Kim)

If you become involved in this, then, the friend who introduced you has to trust you and then others will let you work. Secondly, you need to know people who would buy the drugs. That's when you can start working. If you want to work in this but you don't have one customer, how can you do it? (Bích)

The speed of the heroin distribution chain meant that volunteers recouped their gambling losses quickly and rose in the network. Bích worked her 'way up from selling to drug users' to 'the top of the network'. This involved 'dealing very large quantities of heroin', having 'ten people working below me', and average weekly earnings of \$20,000. Kim reported average weekly earnings of between \$5000 and \$7000, and sometimes \$10,000. She explained: 'You just need someone to teach you how to mix it, which does not take long, and then it is ready to be sold to other people'. Kim progressed from holding the heroin to mid-level distribution and recruitment of mules. She explained:

These people were actually looking for me! They needed help to get out of their gambling debt... If you are in debt and in need of money to gamble further or repay debts, you have to go to Vietnam to bring the heroin over and internally conceal it in your body such as your bottom... I introduced three people and I was responsible for these three people because my boss didn't know them.

The one volunteer in the cannabis trade described herself as 'co-organiser' of a small cultivation enterprise. Vân 'arranged the house' and her friend organised the equipment and crop-sitter, with a view to dividing the eventual profits. Her reported earnings of '\$5000 per month' were much less than those reported in the heroin trade. Nonetheless Vân more than resolved her debts, unlike other participants in the cannabis trade. She explained:

When I got caught, I was very lucky that I had repaid all my gambling debts. I was successful in cultivating a few batches. After I repaid my gambling debts, I was stupid not to save the rest of the money I made from doing this. I decided to splurge on things such as a brand new plasma TV and designer handbags and things like that.

Vân's spending spree highlights how what began as a desperate effort to resolve a gambling debt sometimes became acquisitive. As noted by VanNostrand and Tewksbury (1999), motives for working in the illicit drug market can change with time. Participants often explained their changing motives in cultural terms. For example, Vân reasoned with the interviewer: 'You're Vietnamese! You know how we work.' Similarly, Kim reflected:

Generally speaking, Vietnamese people – and you would know this – are excessively greedy. Do you understand? The greedier you are, the worse it is. . . I enjoyed dealing heroin because it was an easy way to make money. I did feel that way.

Volunteers' failure to 'jump off [*nhảy ra*]' the drugs pathway following debt clearance eventually led to their downfall. Bích, for example, acknowledged that 'if I had stopped when I made enough money, then this wouldn't have happened':

While you are doing this, you can't do it consistently. You do it for a few months and then you take a break because you need to protect your safety. But when you are caught up in all the money that you can make, then you get stuck in it and do it constantly. That's when you get caught up with the police and you go to prison. That's what happened to me.

Different entry points into the 'drugs pathway' produced different outcomes. Conscripts were invariably incarcerated before they had repaid their debts; volunteers were invariably incarcerated after they had repaid their debts. The median maximum custodial sentence for conscripts was 19 months, whereas for volunteers it was eight years. In this respect, the women's sentences were apparently congruent with their degree of initiative, autonomy, mobility and control.

Gambling and drugs

This study of 35 Vietnamese women imprisoned for drug crimes in Melbourne, Australia, demonstrates a strong association between 'problem gambling' and illicit drug markets, overlooked in the literature on problem gambling's social effects. Specifically, the study demonstrates the pathway from casino gambling to illicit drug crimes, notably the trafficking of heroin and the cultivation of cannabis. The pathway operates at two levels. First, gambling provides the main motivation for drug-related crime: that is, more than half of the participants in this study were motivated by debts incurred through casino gambling. Second, gambling provides the opportunity for drug-related crime: specifically, the participants' gambling networks routinely facilitated their entry into illicit drug markets.

Neo-classical economic orthodoxy – which understands drug trafficking as a commodity trade grounded in 'risks and prices' – provides some leverage in understanding the pathway from gambling to illicit drug crimes. Most notably, participants who took more risks in drug trafficking received greater rewards, and were more heavily punished. The Mertonian framework – which understands drug trafficking as a minority response to blocked opportunity structures – also provides some leverage. Most participants came from disadvantaged backgrounds, and entered drug trafficking because it offered the

only apparent means to repay their gambling debts. The Vietnamese institution of informal lending *cho'i hui* provided a structural link between gambling and drug trafficking, consistent with innovation in Merton's sense. Moreover, the most enterprising participants remained in the trade once they had repaid their gambling debts because it was an 'easy way to make money'.

Yet neither 'risks and prices' nor blocked opportunity structures account for many aspects of the pathway from gambling to illicit drug crimes. Consistent with the socio-cultural framework, participants' entry into drug trafficking was deeply embedded in social relationships, reputation and trust. Participants attended the casino in the first instance to socialise and meet other Vietnamese people. They were also influenced by escapism and magical thinking, akin to Merton's (1938) concept of 'retreatism' whereby actors reject both cultural goals and the institutionalised means to attain them. As one participant explained, there is 'a lot of money to be made' in drug trafficking, but 'for the majority of people who come in here, their hands are empty'. Whereas media reports frame lenders as 'loan sharks' – consistent with the neo-classical framework – participants described them as 'friends', who provided them with help in difficult circumstances. In turn, these friends facilitated entry into illicit drug markets in order to resolve gambling debt.

Yet the social embeddedness observed in this study is a far cry from the tightly-knit kinship and communal ties routinely reported in the criminological literature on ethnic drug networks. Participants' kinship and communal ties were thin and precarious. They were more often divorced than married. They went to the casino because – as one participant explained – it 'makes you happy and helps you forget about your problems'. It was also a way of making 'friends'. Participants' casino 'friends' facilitated their gambling loans and their involvement in illicit drug markets. Notwithstanding the contingency of these friendships, they still depended upon trust, reputation and cooperation. As one participant declared: 'There needs to be trust'.

In close connection, the gender dynamics observed in this study depart not only from the 'pathology and powerless narrative' of mainstream criminology, but also key themes of recent scholarship. Participants were neither peripheral in drug distribution networks; nor were they defined by their familial relations, their relationships with men, or their sexuality. On the contrary, participants' alienation from familial and marital relationships fuelled their casino gambling in the first place, giving rise to their involvement in illicit drug markets. From this point, participants assumed diverse roles – ranging from mules and crop-sitters at the bottom of the drug distribution chain, to coordination and supervision at more senior levels. In other words, drug distribution networks provided participants with scope for agency, initiative and social mobility.

Yet the bottom line is that participants ended up in prison. In these circumstances, they seized the opportunity to tell their stories and draw lessons from their experiences. Their stories present a rich contribution to the 'formulation of minority perspectives in criminology' (Phillips & Bowling, 2003, p. 270), moving beyond sterile debates around ethnic minorities and drug crimes. They also present an opportunity for policy officials to listen to minority perspectives, question conventional policy approaches, and develop more finely-tuned interventions directed towards the articulation between gambling and drugs.

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